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ABSTRACT

State efforts at establishing accountability programs have not been successful because few states could or did install the essential ingredients of accountability systems and even fewer took the elements they had very seriously; accountability systems are based on the false assumption that the people who operate an educational system actually have sufficient power to independently make decisions necessary to achieve accountability; and it is not possible to explain how the costs of a program have impacted on the performance of students. Rather than on accountability, emphasis should be placed on "explainability" as a desirable and achievable condition and on participation in the educational decision-making structure by the public, students, and teachers. (Author/IRT)

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHANGE IN EDUCATION: AN EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION AT THE STATE LEVEL

Presentation to the American Association of School Administrators

Atlantic City, New Jersey

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I have a superintendent friend, who is rather wierd to begin with, who tells me he is going to seek psychiatric help because he has a reoccuring dream in which he's playing the character Patrick McGoohan did in the television program a few years back called "The Prisoner." As you may remember, for some 16 weeks (and then innumerable reruns), we saw McGoohan as a prisoner in this strange village, he doesn't know where, he doesn't know why he's there, he doesn't know who put him there and he can't find out how to escape. According to my friend, his dream is very similar, except he can't get out of the village because he can't define "accountability."

I haven't caught his particular brand of paranoia yet, but part of the problem in attempting to provide you with an evaluation of the efforts by states to implement "accountability" is the lack of agreement on its definition, purpose and essential characteristics.

Apparently somebody in the federal government has dreams similar to my superintendent friend, because those people have spent literally millions of dollars to produce tons of documents, models, training programs and ERIC citations on the topic of accountability. And this phobia must be pretty common in the nocturnal deliberations of state officials, too. We've told that about 19 states now have "accountability" legislation; that 37 states have published documents relating to their accountability activites and that all 50 states have implemented at least portions of so-called accountability systems. (Hawke, 1975).

The common theme running through all of this output is the assumption that somehow state agencies and school systems should be able to demonstrate the relationship between costs for their programs and benefits resulting from those programs in the way of student performance. There is an assumption underlying all of these

definitions that every child can learn if the right conditions prevail and that by insisting that schools be "accountable," we'll all be assured of the highest quality education possible at the most reasonable cost. To do this, all we have to do is establish systems which: set goals, assess student performance, identify gaps between goals and performance, select priorities, design objectives for our programs, analyze effective alternative strategies, select the best strategy, allocate the necessary resources according to this strategy, evaluate our effectiveness and recycle the system however necessary.

Well, my overall evaluation of accountability efforts at the state level (I wouldn't presume to suggest that you're not doing a better job at the local level) is that such efforts have not worked.

- They have not resulted in higher levels of student performance;
- They have not resulted in reduced costs;
- They have not resulted in an ability to show cost-benefit relationships;
- They have not silenced the critics who continue to call for "accountability";
- They have not resulted in a better technology of teaching;
- They have not improved relationships between state officials and their legislators, between state officials and local school boards, between local boards and administrators, between administrators and teachers, or between teachers, students and parents.

In fact, accountability has continued to stretch the credibility gap without stretching the performance power of the educational dollar. In fact, I would dare say that at least as much damage has been done to the environment of education in this country in the past ten years in the name of "accountability" than any other factor I could name. And I might point out that my husband, a historian who has been researching early antecedents of accountability-like movements in Victorian England, has found similar results--only there, in some cases, these movements resulted in permanent physical and mental damage to students.

In summary, the body of what we generally accept as accountability systems (at least at the state level) is moribund and is being sustained only by the tenuous cord of rhetoric and good intentions. It's time somebody pulled the plug. The body is beginning to smell. And let's not be confused that the movement of accountability is healthy just because it appears to be growing. Let's not confuse growth with life. Cemetaries grow continuously.

Least I be misunderstood, let me state at the outset, that I'm generally in sympathy with the frustrations, the angers and the good intentions of those who have sincerely tried to make "accountability" a reality in American education. The litany of ways in which we need to improve are endless. Evidence of our arrogance, our unresponsiveness, our discrimination, our "turf protection" is amply available. I don't need to catalogue these things, because in your hearts, you know them as well or better than I.

But the way we've approached accountability thus far just hasn't had much impact on reducing these frustrations and angers or achieving all of the good intentions and I'd like to suggest at least three major reasons why.

First, all too few states either did not or could not install the so-called essential ingredients of accountability systems. And I'm afraid that fewer still look the elements that they had in place very seriously.

- Almost all states have goals for education. Few have any mechanism for seeing that such goals influence either state or local policymaking. They're cosmetic and they don't cover the blemishes that what actually goes on, day-by-day, in most state departments or most schools, have little relationship to such goals.

- Almost all states have student assessment programs. Yet, in a survey I did three years ago, less than 30 percent of these states could give me evidence of one single significant policy

decision which had been made as a result of all of this data collection other than the setting of priorities for Title III, ESEA. Only slightly half used it for that purpose. And precious few of those did any follow-up to see if the priorities were consistently followed in the awarding of funds or whether the funded projects had made any significant impact on reducing the problems which led to the priorities in the first place. Lest you think I'm picking on state departments, how many of you have any confidence in your district-wide testing programs and how many of you use these data for significant policy decisions.

- As I noted, slightly over half of the states had a mechanism for setting priorities--but primarily for the purpose of Title III, ESEA. These priorities had almost no effect on other federal grant-in-aid programs or the allocation of state resources. And almost none had any system for ranking their priorities so that scarce dollars could be focused on the most critical needs.

- The development of specific objectives to achieve such priorities were again, almost nonexistent, as were the availability of any written plans of how such objectives would be achieved.

- The search for alternative strategies, if it existed, was certainly not recognized as a formalized element of their accountability systems. In fact, I repeatedly was told that state departments were so locked into staffs and strategies dictated by the requirements of their state or federal dollars that even when they could identify new strategies, they had no resources to implement them.

- Cost accounting or budget allocation by goal or priority also seldom existed, as did any formal evaluation activity which focused specifically on the effectiveness of the state department of education. I was again repeatedly told that state legislators were most unsympathetic to the use of state monies for state department-level evaluation; what federal dollars could be scraped together were usually under intense political pressure to be redistributed to the local level.

So maybe it's not fair to say accountability hasn't worked at the state level when the data tends to suggest that it hasn't even had a chance to work.

However, I think my second reason for the lack of effectiveness of state accountability efforts is more defensible. The notion of accountability and accountability systems is based on the assumption that the people who operate an educational system actually have sufficient power to independently make decisions necessary to achieve

accountability. The policy-making, program operation, personnel and budgeting decision systems in American education are so interwoven between the federal government, the state government, the local school board, professional teacher or administrator associations, state systems of higher education, independent commissions and boards, citizen advisory groups and so forth and so forth--that to assume that any single one of these units can establish and operate its own independent accountability system, at least as they are now defined, is to stretch credulity, let alone credibility. The teachers have been telling us this for years in their plea for some type of "negotiated accountability" which at least recognizes those factors over which teachers have no control. Too few accountablity efforts have legitimately recognized this "interdependency." Too few have been realistic in either limiting their efforts to what they could be "accountable" for or establishing mechanisms to adjust for shared decision-making.

Third, given the status of educational research in this country, I think one of the major philosophical assumptions underlying accountability is currently unachievable--and we might as well admit it. I mentioned earlier that accountability assumes educational agencies should have the ability to explain how the costs of their programs have impacted on the performance of students. Presumably this assumption includes also the ability to explain the impact of choices about instructional materials, teaching technologies, types of personnel, special services and the use of other types of schooling resources. Given the current status of educational research, I don't think this is possible. Research can't agree on how children learn, let alone which choices of schooling resources consistently and repeatedly will make a difference in student performance. And if you don't believe me, I suggest you read the results of the 1975 Forum for the Advancement of State Educational Assessment Programs. Speaker after speaker

spoke to ways for improving the processes of assessment...but all admitted that while they might be able to tell you what performance has occurred, they could only make gross generalizations and estimates as to why the data turned out the way it did. The simple comparison of dollars spent to levels of student test scores reminds me of another friend who says its like trying to make a complete medical diagnosis of a patient by only taking the pulse rate. But before you leave here thinking I'm suggesting the abondonment of all state or local assessment programs, let me say that I think if we are ever going to find a way to place student performance in a cause-effect relationship to school-controlled variables, that these assessment programs offer us our best current chance of finding out how to do this. I'm pretty active in the university research field as well as the school assessment area and I'm seeking far more creative research and far more effective experimentation coming out of state departments and local school-based research staffs than I am in university settings. I think the assessment programs are worth hanging on to for at least a few more years for this reason alone--but you have a right to insist that they place even more emphasis on the research aspect of their activities.

I frankly don't think it is possible to develop a new definition and set of assumptions for the word "accountability" that will address the three issues that I've raised. So let's do what educators are so good at and change the emphasis in jargon towards words which might head us in more profitable and productive directions.

- First, I'd like to see us substitute the word "explainability" for "accountability." It seems to me that "explainability" is both a desirable condition and an achievable one. At both the state and local level, we do have a reasponsibility to be explicit about the intended outcomes of our

various educational units and to make these public; we do have a reasponsibility to explain what priorities we've set among these outcomes; we do have a responsibility and an ability to show how and if our resource allocation is tied to these priorities; we do have an ability and a responsibility to explain patterns of student performance and in terms people can understand... even if we can't tell them precisely why this performance is occurring. We do have both a right and a responsibility to explain, realistically, the limitations and the possibilies of our educational enterprises.

- And second, I'd like to see us get very serious about adding the word "participation" to our jargon. I think one of the basic goals of those who call for "accountability" is the desire to open up and make more public the educational decision-making structure--at all levels right down to the classroom. And we've been terribly negligent. The December issure of The Futurist has a very provocative article on what has been happening to citizen involvement in this country. (Lend, 1975) In 10 years, the number of people who believe that their opinion doesn't matter anymore has almost doubled and is now over the 60 percent mark. Remember the results of the NAEP citizenship assessment in 1970 and the large number of respondents at all ages who said they felt it was impossible to have any impact on governmental decisions? One of the pieces of data our State Board of Education heard when it was considering new competency-based graduation requirements was the results of a survey of student attitudes in Oregon which showed that over half of such students considered school "dull and boring" and believed there was nothing they could do about it.

A recent issue of The Journal of Educational Research carried some interesting data about teachers' attitudes toward assessment and accountability programs. This

data was collected in one of the states which has been a leader in the accountability movement and the researcher set out to answer four questions: Could teachers understand the communications about accountability and assessment they received from the state or local level? Did they believe these communications to be consistent with the purposes of the school program? Did they feel that the communications about accountability and assessment reflected things which were compatible with their own personal interests? Did they feel mentally and physically able to comply with whatever was requested in the communications? The answer generally was "yes" to the first questions, and a resounding "no" to the last three questions. (Bleecher, 1975) Depending on your view of teachers, you may want to ignore these findings. But to me, they say something rather frightening about the degree to which those teachers felt they had not been involved in determining accountability and assessment purposes and systems. And if Don Levine has a chance to say a bit about his findings on his research--particularly as it relates to problems encountered in the way accountability systems are initiated and who has what kind of participatory roles, I believe he'll confirm these findings.

To me, these kinds of data are much more serious than a drop this year in the SAT scores. To me they are indicators of a profound distrust or lack of confidence in current policy leadership and this includes education. To some degree I believe we have contributed to this by our continued use of the word "accountability" when instead, we should have been devoted our energies to finding more productive and effective ways to solve the problems associated with the so-called "accountability" movement.

I'd like to leave you with a poem which is reportedly anonymous, but I think perhaps was penned by an individual at the national, state or local level who has been charged with implementing accountability systems.

If you run very hard

With great effort and strain

You may clamber aboard

The last car, the wrong train

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